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# Linkages of oil and politics: oil strikes and dual power in the Iranian revolution

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## ABSTRACT

Looking at the oil strikes during the Iranian revolution (1978–79), this article challenges dominant narratives of the relationship between oil and politics and the processes that shaped the outcome of the revolution. The main arguments of the article are developed in a critical dialogue with Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy*. Firstly, the article argues that the scale of the oil strikes and their central role in the creation of organs of revolutionary power call into question the generalization about the material characteristics of oil that supposedly prevented mobilization. Secondly, the article argues that the fact that oil workers were able to organize mass strikes, but failed to create an independent organization, calls for an explanatory approach that combines material factors with the role of consciousness, ideology and organization. This leads to a rereading of the Iranian revolution that highlights the essential role of the oil strikes in the emergence of dual power in early 1979, and the contingency of their outcome.

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## Introduction

On 29 December 1978, a year after the first mass demonstrations had erupted against Iran's despotic monarchy, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ordered the establishment of a committee to coordinate and supervise the oil strikes that had started in early September. This strategic move was a clear acknowledgement of the significance of the oil strikes by the revolutionary movement's charismatic leader. On the other side of the barricades, Shah (Mohammad Reza Pahlavi) had acknowledged the significance of the oil strikes a few days earlier, when he lamented, 'We are melting away'.<sup>1</sup> Less than seven weeks later, his regime had been toppled, not in the last place due to the oil strikes.

Given their central role in the Iranian revolution, the oil strikes provide an interesting opportunity to put politics into the study of labor, and labor into the study of the oil-politics nexus. The latter approach is particularly important, as the oil-politics nexus has been mainly studied through the role of oil revenues. I begin this labor-centered exploration of the relationship between oil and politics in the Iranian revolution through a critical reading of Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* (2011), which, in focusing on the role of labor, provides indispensable insight into the political possibilities and limits attached to the materiality of oil.

The subsequent section uses archival documents, newspapers and interviews to narrate the development of the oil strikes and analyze their impact on the state and the revolutionary movement. The centerpiece of this article explores how and why the socio-technical aspects of oil production in Iran

enabled mass mobilizations among oil workers. I argue that in the light of the Iranian revolution, the universality of Mitchell's claim that the oil industry's objective characteristics deprived its workers of the potential for large-scale mobilizations should be nuanced. Another revision of Mitchell's argument is introduced in the final section, which proposes that although a focus on the materiality of oil is an important corrective to the cultural turn in labor historiography, it provides an incomplete account of labor activism among oil workers. Without the inclusion of the role of consciousness, ideology and organization in the overall analysis, it is impossible to understand the process of mobilization during the Iranian oil strikes, and their failure to ensure a more democratic, just and equal post-revolutionary polity.

Finally, this article makes a contribution to the historiography of the Iranian revolution. Despite their significance, the oil strikes and their political consequences have received little attention in studies of the Iranian revolution, which focus mostly on the role of the clergy, religion and political organizations.<sup>2</sup> The oil strikes, I argue, were central to the emergence of the dual power in early 1979 and highlight the political nature and contingency of Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership, rather than his religious credentials.

### Linkages of oil and politics

Since Hossein Mahdavi (1970) coined the term 'rentier state', the relationship between oil and politics in the developing countries has been explored by mainly political scientists who have focused on the mediating role of oil revenues. Using cross-national statistical tests, a number of publications have argued that abundance of oil money hinders democracy, while others, using the same method, have challenged (parts of) the 'resource curse' literature, and its conceptual framework of democracy and democratization. As one study concludes, 'The jury appears to be out concerning the generality of the "oil hinders democracy" hypothesis' (Oskarsson & Ottosen, 2010, p. 1068).

It is against the backdrop of this methodological and conceptual impasse that one has to appreciate the significance of Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* (2011). Instead of reducing oil to oil money, Mitchell draws attention to 'the nature of oil and how it is produced, distributed and used' in order to explore 'the particular ways of engineering political relations out of flows of energy' (pp. 1 and 5)—an argument that should speak to labor historians. The ways in which coal was produced and distributed in the nineteenth century, he argues, made mass politics possible as '[w]orkers were gradually connected together not so much by the weak ties of a class culture, collective ideology or political organization, but by the increasing and highly concentrated quantities of carbon energy they mined, loaded, carried, stoked and put to work' (Mitchell, 2011, p. 27). The ability to sabotage flows of energy, mainly through strikes, gave workers the 'socio-technical agency' that made mobilizations for democratic claim-making possible. 'Unlike the movement of coal,' Mitchell argues, 'the flow of oil could not readily be assembled into a machine that enabled large numbers of people to exercise novel forms of political power' (Mitchell, 2011, p. 39).

I will return to the 'socio-technical' differences between the flows of coal and oil that, according to Mitchell, created different mobilization capacities, but let us first continue with his overall argument, in which the two different forms of energy, coal and oil, correspond respectively with the two meanings he attributes to democracy. Democracy 'can refer to ways of making effective claims for a more just and egalitarian common world. Or it can refer to a mode of governing populations that employs popular consent as a means of limiting claims for greater equality and justice by dividing up the common world' (Mitchell, 2011, p. 9).

There are a number of problems with these claims. One problem, which I cannot discuss here, is the reduction of the forces of democratization in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the collective power of mine workers.<sup>3</sup> More relevant to this article's topic are the contradictions and deficiencies that flow from Mitchell's conceptualization of the way in which political relations are forged from energy flows.<sup>4</sup> Mitchell argues that the conversion from coal to oil limited democratization in the West as well as in the Middle East. In the West, this conversion undermined the collective power of mine workers, who were replaced with similarly compromised

workers, weakening the left and building corporatist forms of democracy. In the Middle East, the delayed development of an oil industry 'impeded [workers'] ability, using the infrastructure of oil, to build effective methods for advancing egalitarian political claims' (Mitchell, 2011, p. 86). Mitchell argues, however, that once building of oil infrastructure in the Middle East had begun,

[T]he petroleum companies were also laying out the infrastructure of political protests. The points of vulnerability, where movements could organize and apply pressure, now included a series of oil wells, pipelines, refineries, railways, docks and shipping lanes across the Middle East. These were interconnected sites at which a series of claims for political freedoms and more egalitarian forms of life would be fought. (p. 103)

He then provides examples of oil workers' protests: the strike at the refinery of Haifa and the sabotage of the Kirkuk-Haifa pipeline in 1936; the strikes of 1946 and 1948 in the Kirkuk oil fields and in the K3 pumping station near Hadithah, which radicalized a rising labor movement that played an important role in the July 1958 revolution in Iraq; the strike at the refinery of Haifa in 1947; the strikes in Abadan (Iran) in 1945–46 and 1951–53; and the strikes at Aramco in Saudi Arabia in 1948–49.

The oil companies, colonial powers and local state officials managed to halt the oil workers' protests from developing into wider protest movements, leading Mitchell to draw the following conclusion that 'Although the oilfields, pumping stations, pipelines and refineries of the Middle East became sites of intense political struggle, they did not offer those involved the same powers to paralyze energy systems and build a more democratic order' (Mitchell, 2011, p. 108). Mitchell, however, neither provides a clear explanation of the oil industry's *in situ* material features that enabled mobilization of oil workers in the first place, nor of the material features that led to the failure of these mobilizations. His most approximate explanation is reference to the two general strikes of Baku oil workers in July 1903 and December 1904, commenting that in this case, the oil industry resembled the coal industry in bringing together a large concentration of workers and producing oil for industrial energy consumption (Labban, 2013).

There are two other, related problems. The 'pattern of labor mobilization ... found in Baku at the turn of the twentieth century' did not 'prove to be an exception', as Mitchell's own examples from the Middle East illustrate (Mitchell, 2011, pp. 33–35). Moreover, as Labban (2016) notes, it does not explain why in the Middle East, 'The power of sabotage... would be organized not by the workers who operated the oil industry, but by the state,' if the geochemical nature of oil was the determinant factor in hindering such sabotage. Finally, this account also disregards the impact of general trends in capitalism, for example automatization, which were not specific to the oil industry, but undermined workers' collective power in the coalmines, the oil industry and other production sites in the second half of the twentieth century.

These discrepancies can be traced back to Mitchell's reified conception of oil, which leads to generalizations that are insufficiently and profusely materialist at the same time. Mitchell's discussion of the nature of oil and its production lacks materiality as the historically and geographically specified material contexts receive little attention. Simultaneously, it is too materialist as it approaches energy as having its own agency, ignoring the mediating role of culture, ideology and organization in shaping oil workers' collective actions. Thus Mitchell (2011) explicitly invites us to think of political change not as the result of 'a social movement, but as the assembling of machines' (p. 109). As I argue in the final section, carbon determinism leaves little room for human agency and historical contingency.

## **Oil strikes: fueling the revolution**

The mass oil strikes of 1978–79 were not unprecedented in Iranian history. The first general strike in Iran took place in Abadan in 1929, proclaiming the arrival of the working class as a new political actor and the potency of a new form of protest, the industrial strike (Cronin, 2010). This potency was displayed again during the strikes of 1946, 1949, and 1951–53. Following the 1953 *coup d'état* against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, who had nationalized the Iranian oil industry in 1951, labor activism in the oil industry subsided dramatically due to multiple factors. In the oil industry, thousands of experienced workers were sent into early retirement. The ban on trade unions, and

the repression of the communist Tudeh party and Mosaddeq's National Front weakened the organizational resources of the oil workers at a time when workplace surveillance was tightened. Intimidation was only part of the story; the absence of significant strikes during the 1960s was also a result of the improving wages and living conditions.

Strikes resurfaced in the 1970s in the oil industry as workers expected to benefit from rising oil incomes. Moreover, the oil workers who had entered the industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s in large numbers (Figure 1), were unburdened by memories of the crushing defeat of 1953. In my study of leftist publications and the annual labor reports of the American Embassy in Iran, I counted eight strikes in the oil industry in 1970–78. Their demands focused on wages, holidays, overtime payment, and working conditions, reflecting the growth of an industrial consciousness and confidence among oil workers. On 16 March 1978, for instance, around 100 workers of the Tehran Jonub company (a subcontractor of Tehran refinery) went on strike in protest against non-payment of the New Year's bonus, but resumed work the same day after officials promised to address their grievances.

As the workforce in the oil industry increased during the 1970s, it also underwent qualitative changes. Rural-urban migration, for example, impacted the cultural dispositions of oil workers. In Tehran, many of the new blue-collar workers recruited to the refinery were migrant workers who had worked in the small workshops around the bazaar, while in Abadan new recruits were often the children of oil workers who had lived in an urban and industrial context for lengthy periods. Hence, traditional and religious ideas were more prevalent among the former than the latter.

A second change was the influx of a new generation of white-collar workers and engineers into the oil industry (Figure 1), many of whom were influenced by the political ideas they had encountered at high school or the university. A few sympathizers of the Tudeh party were still working in the oil industry, but the influence of their pro-Moscow communism had diminished, while new radical ideologies had come into vogue. Islamic student associations functioned as transmitters of both the liberal-Islamic ideas of Mehdi Bazargan and the revolutionary Islamic ideas of Ali Shariati, who blended Shia Islam with Marxism into a Third Worldist liberation theology. In my interviews with oil workers who participated in the revolution, Shariati was often quoted as a major source of inspiration. Not surprisingly, Shariati gave a number of lectures in the late 1960s and early 1970s at the Islamic association of the Abadan Technological Institute, which trained the oil industry's engineers.

New leftist groups that emerged in the late 1960s around the strategy of armed struggle developed a modest presence among oil workers as well. The Razmandegan organization had a tiny cell in the Abadan refinery, and the Fada'ian guerrilla organization had a few members in the Tehran refinery and in the oil fields.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes leftist ideas were transmitted through teachers at high schools or the oil

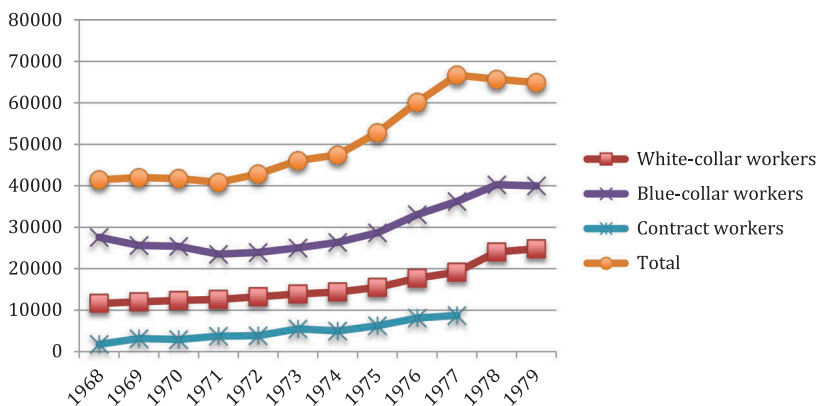


Figure 1. Number of workers in the Iranian oil industry Source: Statistical Centre of Iran (1978).

Note: The total number includes foreign white-collar workers. The number of contract workers in 1978 and 1979 are included in the categories white-collar and blue-collar workers; no separate figures were available for those years.

workers' training schools. Heshmat Re'isi, who worked at the Tehran refinery, for instance, recalls being influenced not only by his father, who as an oil worker had vivid memories of the great 1946 oil strike in Abadan, but also by two teachers in the oil industry's training school.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini attempted to offer an Islamist alternative to the leftist ideologies. In this respect, the role of Khomeini's close ally Morteza Motahari was instrumental as his interest in philosophy and Marxism, and his teaching at the theology faculty of Tehran University brought him in contact with the educated middle class, the Islamic student associations and the professional associations such as the Islamic Society of Engineers. Some of the white-collar workers were influenced by the Khomeini's brand of Islamism through the student milieu and the mosques they frequented. A handful of the Abadan refinery's workers, for instance, stood in contact with the city's most important cleric Gholam-Hossein Jami who supported Khomeini (Markaz-e barresi-ye asnad-e tarikhi-ye vezarat-e ettela'at, 2013). Khomeini's ideas were also transmitted through activists such as Mohammad Javad Tondguyan, who studied at the Abadan Technologic Institute from 1968 to 1972 and chaired its Islamic Association. After becoming employed in the Tehran refinery in 1972, he frequently visited his co-thinkers at the Abadan refinery.<sup>7</sup> After the fall of the monarchy, he became the Islamic Republic's first Minister of Oil for a short time.

Thus the 1970s witnessed the development of a small network of labor activists who were rooted in workplace struggles and played a crucial role in connecting these struggles with the wider revolutionary movement when it emerged in January 1978 in the form of mass demonstrations. These demonstrations grew in strength, but in the summer receded. When they resurfaced in late August during the holy month of Ramadan, they were violently repressed on 8 September 1978 (Black Friday). It looked as if the regime would survive the political crisis, as it had on several other occasions. As late as September 28, the prognosis of the American Defense Intelligence Agency was that the Shah 'is expected to remain actively in power over the next ten years' (quoted in Yergin, 1991, p. 677). In the following two months, however, the revolutionary movement acquired a qualitatively different character as protests spread to workplaces and mass strikes erupted in major economic sectors.

In the oil industry, the strikes developed in four phases. A number of workers had planned a protest in front of the Tehran refinery on September 8, which incidentally coincided with the bloody events of that day. The strikes then spread to other refineries and the oil fields of Ahwaz, Gachsaran and Aqajari in the south. This prompted the SAVAK, the Shah's secret service, to report that the oil strikes 'have no precedent in recent years; the strikes must have developed among workers in the national oil company very quickly'.<sup>8</sup> In Tehran, Black Friday was an important catalyst of the strikes, and in Abadan the arson of Cinema Rex that killed around 400 people in late August politicized many oil workers.<sup>9</sup> By early October 1978, however, the oil strikes had subsided after officials made some concessions and intimidated the strike leaders.

The second wave of strikes began when oil workers in Abadan staged a sit-in on 16 October 1978. Two days later, the white-collar workers (*karmands*) in the oil company offices of Ahwaz initiated a strike that lasted 33 days. Around the same time, blue-collar workers (*kargars*) in the oil fields near Ahwaz also went on strike. This second wave faded in the last two weeks of November as the government sent in the military into the oil fields and the refineries, but by then oil workers had become organized more effectively.

At Abadan refinery, the blue-collar workers formed a 13-member strike committee in late October (Iranian Oil Worker, 1980). They were in contact with the strike committee of the white-collar workers in Ahwaz, the Association of Oil Industry Staff Employees that consisted of 60 representatives elected from the different offices of the oil company in the city. A founding member of this white-collar workers' association explained the process:

The representatives were not elected by secret ballot. The vote took place in front of everyone. We put up a list on the wall. People came and signed their names next to the name of their preferred candidate. There were usually five or six candidates per position. The first duty of these representatives was to organize the association of professional and office workers. So, we called this body the Organizing Committee of Oil Industry Employees. (Iranian Oil Worker, 1980, p. 293)

The Association was further formalized in the last week of November with the election of a Coordinating Committee. In the Tehran refinery, a secret strike committee of blue-collar workers had been active since September, but a new committee including white-collar workers was established in the second week of November. Its 12 representatives were elected from the various refinery departments (Pelaschi, 2011). In late November, the Common Syndicate of the Employees of the Iranian Oil Industry was established to represent the blue-collar and white-collar workers in the oil, gas and petrochemical industry, although it mainly operated in Tehran.

The composition of the strike committees differed from location to location, but often the leading members belonged to or sympathized with the organizations of the secular left, mainly the Fada'iyān and to a lesser degree the Tudeh party. Others were followers of Khomeini or independents. It is notable that when the strikes erupted, the presence of the organized left was quite weak among the oil workers, but as strikes continued the left recruited new members and increased its influence. In Ahwaz, 35 percent of delegates of the strike committee elected in November 1978 were Marxists. Following the fall of the monarchy, however, supporters of Khomeini, in coalition with liberal Islamic figures like Mehdi Bazargan who headed the Provisional Government, maneuvered to marginalize the left and organized new elections, in which the left gained only 15 percent. Only five of the 40 members of the Abadan refinery strike committee were leftists at this stage (*The Washington Post*, 26 February 1979). Only the organization of the contract workers of the oil industry was led by leftists. It is important to note, however, that most of the Islamist members of the strike committees, and later the Islamic *shoras* (councils), belonged to the populist faction that supported a form of self-management and thus clashed with the post-revolutionary managers in 1979–1981, a conflict that ultimately led to the repression and dissolution of the *shoras*.

Having strengthened their organizational structure, the oil workers resumed their strike in early December 1978, this time with explicitly political demands that focused on the departure of the Shah. Following Khomeini's call for a general strike on 2 December—to coincide with the beginning of the holy month Moharram—the Common Syndicate issued a call for a general strike in the oil industry. The Abadan refinery took the lead once again, but strikes spread to the offshore oil platforms and the Ahwaz and Marun oil fields in the following days (*The Washington Post*, 4 December 1978). In Gachsaran and Aghajari workers were forced to work at bayonet point, but went on strike at the end of the second week of December. The government's increased repression backfired as 6000 oil workers quitted their jobs when officials threatened to dismiss striking workers (Parsa, 1989, p. 160).

The fourth and final phase of the oil strikes that started in the last days of 1978 was not marked by an interlude, but by a qualitative change. While the strike committees of the oil workers had taken control of oil production at the local level, Khomeini established a committee to coordinate the oil strikes at the national level. I will return to this phase that lasted until late January 1979, but let us first look at the oil workers' demands.

The strikes came as a great surprise to those who regarded the workers as a 'labor aristocracy'. This approach, however, ignored the great differences between employees within the oil industry (white-collar and blue-collar workers; permanent and contract workers), the harsh working conditions of oil workers in general, and their connections to the wider working-class communities. The oil strikes, like any other class-based protest, involved an uneven and complex process of social mobilization and articulation of demands that depended on various factors such as one's position within the labor process, traditions of activism, as well as political, ethnic and religious dispositions. Oil workers' propensity to strike differed, of course, but the resulting tensions were usually overcome by persuasion or social pressure (Khosrowshahi, 2008). As far as violent acts were involved, they were sporadic and targeted foreign and Iranian managers; the perpetrators were members of armed political organizations rather than oil workers.<sup>10</sup>

Oil workers had various demands, which quickly shifted from economic to political one due to the sweeping revolutionary mood and the fact that oil workers were confronted with the state as their employer. A careful reading of the demands of the oil strikes provides a sense of the class-consciousness developed among the active participants. These demands were quite specific, falling into four

categories: economic demands, demands around employment inequality, political demands related to workplace issues, and national and international policies of the state. Economic issues included higher wages and the non-payment of benefits and housing allowances (*Ettela'at*, 23 September 1978); shortage of company houses, bonuses for technical work and weather conditions, payment for lunch during work (*Ettela'at* 24 September 1978); and the inequalities between white-collar and blue-collar workers in the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) (*Ettela'at*, 5 October 1978).

Demands related to equal employment rights targeted the differences between tenured workers of NIOC and works that were employed temporarily by NIOC or through subcontractors. Demands related to workplace politics included the dismissal of a number of managers who were accused of corruption, the dismissal of foreign staff in the oil industry, and the establishment of independent trade unions (*Ettela'at*, 24 October 1978). Political demands transcending the workplace included the fusion of NIOC and the Oil Services Company of Iran (OSCO), which was run by international oil companies, and an end of oil export to Israel and South Africa (*Ettela'at*, 30 October 1978).

By late October 1978, the demands of the oil strikes were fully politicized, as the following list published by the white-collar workers in the south illustrates: 1) an end to martial law; 2) full solidarity and co-operation with striking teachers; 3) unconditional release of all political prisoners; 4) Iranization of the oil industry's workforce; 5) all communications to be in the Persian language; 6) all foreign employees to leave the country; 7) an end to discrimination against women staff employees and workers; 8) the implementation of a law recently passed by both houses of parliament dealing with the housing of all workers and staff employees; 9) support for the demands of the production workers, including the dissolution of SAVAK; 10) punishment of corrupt high governmental officials and ministers; 11) a reduced manning schedule for offshore drilling crews (Bayat, 1987, pp. 80–81).

The socioeconomic and political grievances of oil workers strongly resonated with the demands of the revolutionary movement. Blue collar-workers, for instance, could relate to the call for social justice in the revolutionary movement as they resented the inequalities between themselves and the white-collar workers. For the latter, the revolutionary movement's anti-imperialism was not an abstract idea, but an expression of the resentment they felt toward the foreign staff, whose presence at the higher positions in the oil industry increased in the 1970s: while there were 4 foreign staff members for every 100 Iranian white-collar workers in 1968, this ratio increased to 13/100 in 1977 (Statistical Center of Iran, 1978). Both blue- and white-collar workers had experienced state repression in the workplace, and were conscious of the dissonance between the state's modernist rhetoric that promised numerous freedoms but undermined individual and collective autonomy within the oil industry. Contract workers, meanwhile, saw the revolution as an opportunity to put forward the demand for inclusion in the regular workforce. Most importantly, the oil workers were conscious of their industry's central place in the nationalist struggles of the past and sympathized with the revolution's anti-imperialist slogans (Jafari, 2013).

The oil strikes paralyzed the state and undermined its revenues and authority, while boosting the morale of the opposition. As one journalist at the time predicted, 'the survival of the government may well depend on the Shah's ability to put an end to the oil strike before the loss of export oil revenue combines with the effect of other labor disruption to put Iran's economy in total disarray' (*The Washington Post*, 3 November 1978). **Figure 2** shows oil production dropping considerably after the strikes became solid in December 1978, reducing Iran's income from 68 to 65 million dollars per day (*Ettela'at*, 1 November 1978). As the strikes continued, military vehicles and ministries were increasingly confronted by fuel shortages.

While oil strikes severely undermined the state's administrative, financial and repressive capacity, they had the opposite impact on the revolutionary movement. Although the media were strictly censored from reporting on demonstrations until November 1978, the oil strikes created fuel shortages that could not go unnoticed by anyone. After the national radio announced the strike of workers in the oil depots near Tehran on 21 October 1978, thousands rushed to the gas stations. 'The shortage of fuel creates havoc in Tehran traffic,' printed the widely read daily *Ettela'at* on its front page the next day. For the first time, official media gave broad coverage to the oil strikes, helping them take center stage in the revolutionary discourse, and increasing the oil workers' confidence.



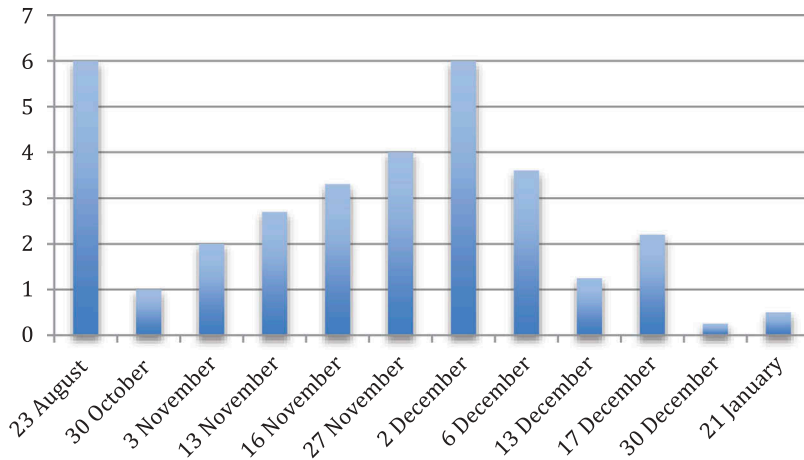


Figure 2. Oil production in million b/d, August 1978–January 1979. Source: collected from various issues of Persian and English newspapers.

As fuel shortages intensified in the last weeks of 1978 and early 1979, acute awareness of the political crisis grew among an increasing number of Iranians who experienced its consequence as they queued daily for fuel (see Picture). Thus by targeting a commodity on which both the state and the majority of Iranian's depended, the oil workers assisted in creating a sense of what Kurzman (2004) calls a 'viable' movement, a movement perceived as a viable challenger of the status quo. Hence, oil was a key transmitter of revolutionary consciousness as it flowed from the sites of production and refining into sites of consumption in the cities and villages.



PICTURE Iranians queuing for fuel in Tehran. The small print Persian text below the picture reads: 'Queues that are few kilometres long emerged in the streets for gasoline and kerosene. Baghe Shah gas station, Sepah Street. The large print states: 'Shortage of kerosene, gasoline, and diesel.'

Source: *Ettela'at*, 6 January 1979

## Crude power: oil workers' disruptive potential

The Iranian oil workers' strikes in 1978–79, as well as those in 1929, 1946 and 1951–53, highlight the oil industry's potential to function as a socio-political locus for mass mobilization, political contention and incubator of new politics. The scale of this mobilization questions the universality and crude determinism of Mitchell's argument that the 'politics of oil differed from those of coal' in terms of enabling mass mobilization and democratic demands due to the distinctive methods of the production and transportation of oil, 'for reasons connected in part to the different physical and chemical form of the carbon it contains' (Mitchell, 2011, p. 36). He explains these differences as follows: 'its [oil's] production required a smaller workforce than coal in relation to the quantity of energy produced. Workers remained above ground, closer to the supervision of managers'. The oil industry's means of transport 'did not require teams of humans to accompany the fuel on its journey' (Mitchell, 2011). Moreover, 'Compared to carrying coal by rail, moving oil by sea eliminated the labor of coal heavers and stokers, and thus the power of organized workers to withdraw their labor from a critical point of the energy system' (Mitchell, 2011, p. 38). These factors made 'energy networks [of oil] less vulnerable to the political claims of those whose labor kept them running. Unlike the movement of coal, the flow of oil could not readily be assembled into a machine that enabled large numbers of people to exercise novel forms of political power' (Mitchell, 2011, p. 39).

As the Iranian revolution illustrates, the oil industry was vulnerable to mass mobilization. This invites a closer examination of the Iranian oil industry in order to explain the deviation from Mitchell's assessment, which focuses on the number of workers and the sites of extraction and transportation. I argue that in order to understand mobilization, we must also examine other material aspects of the oil industry, mainly the positional power of workers given the oil industry's location within the overall economy, and other sites of the oil industry, including refineries, administrative and maintenance departments and ancillary facilities providing housing, health and social services to oil workers.

The concept of disruptive potential, the ability to disrupt economic activities by a group of workers, is helpful in explaining the oil workers' capacity to strike during the Iranian revolution. The disruptive potential of a specific group of workers depends most importantly on their size in numbers, geographical and industrial concentration, positional power, labor market relations and organizational features of the industry affecting mobilization.

### *Size of the workforce*

On the eve of the revolution, the oil industry was organized around the NIOC and its subsidiaries, OSCO (owned by foreign companies), and a number of private subcontractors. The oil industry employed relatively few workers compared to its production of five to six million barrels a day, but their numbers were still considerable. Having dropped to about 40,000 by 1970, the number of employees increased to 67,000 in early 1978, as Iran expanded its oil facilities and production. This number rises to almost 80,000 when we add the roughly 12,000 employees of the distribution organization of the oil industry and the several hundred employees of its Cooperative Consumptive Organization of the Oil Industry (Statistical Center of Iran, 1982).

Moreover, the oil industry had dozens of subcontractors that employed at least the same number. Its distribution organization alone employed about 50,000 contract workers.<sup>11</sup> Thus around 2.3 percent of the 3.54 million Iranian workers—4.5 percent when those working for subcontractors are included—worked for the oil industry.<sup>12</sup> In comparison, at the turn of the nineteenth century, coal miners made up 2.4 percent of the British working class, and by 1921 their share had reached 3.6 percent, before declining rapidly in the following decades.<sup>13</sup> To be fair, these numbers do not include the workers in the transport and outlets, which increase these percentages considerably. Nevertheless, the comparison suggests that although the size of the labor force in the Iranian oil industry was small, it was still considerable.

### ***Geographical and industrial concentration***

Concentration was another factor determining oil workers' disruptive potential. Geographically, most oil workers were concentrated in the southwestern Khuzestan province. Ahwaz and Abadan formed, with respectively 334,000 and 310,000 inhabitants in 1976, the industrial centers of the province (Shoraye aliye barnamehrizi-ye ostan-e khuzestan, 1982, p. 238). Outside of Khuzestan province, the cities of Kermanshah, Shiraz, Tabriz, Tehran and Isfahan had significant numbers of oil workers because of their refineries (the Isfahan refinery was under construction in 1987–79). The exploration, drilling and extraction sites of the oil industry were capital intensive, and thus required a relatively small workforce. The largest numbers of oil workers were concentrated in refineries, administrative offices, and in ancillary services such as the depots, maintenance workshops, housing and healthcare centers.

Notably, oil workers' geographic concentration increased in the 1970s due to 'satellization'. From the mid-1960s, the ancillary services of locations of oil production (oil fields) and transportation (pipelines, pumping stations and export terminals) were increasingly moved to central locations such as Abadan, Ahwaz and Tehran. From these locations, workers performed tours of duty. Satellization transformed the internal organization of the oil industry by creating 'larger facilities for offices, laboratories, and storage, and repair and employee services', and new external connections by involving more 'contractors instead of company-supplied services in geographically dispersed locations' (Melamid, 1973, p. 28).

Finally, it is important to consider that while oil workers were a distinct community in terms of their relatively high income and status, they nevertheless formed part of the larger working class communities through kinship, living spaces, and religious practices. The oil industry was located in highly industrialized environments. Khuzestan, for instance, harbored not only the oil industry, but had experienced rapid industrialization in the late 1960s, producing paper, cement, steel, sugar, processed food and light intermediaries. It also possessed a network of (rail)roads. In Tehran, Abadan and Ahwaz, oil workers were part of urban communities and many immigrants had retained their connections with provincial hinterlands, returning during the holidays, or receiving visitors from their hometowns. One notable difference was that in Abadan oil workers were much more confined to their company built districts, while in Tehran and Ahwaz they interacted more widely with other residents.

### ***Positional power***

The third contributing factor to the disruptive potential of workers was the 'endogenous strategic positions of workers' resulting from 'their particular position within the overall production process' (Van der Linden, 2008, p. 200). While the strategic position of a group of workers can reside in the labor process of a particular industry, it can also derive from its role in the overall 'system of economic interdependencies' (Perrone, Wright, & Griffin, 1984, pp. 413–414). Positional power is a stronger determinant of workers' disruptive potential than numbers and concentration suggest, allowing,

small groups to interrupt productive processes and/or services far beyond the groups immediate job concern [...]. The effectiveness of a strike thus depends not simply on the pressures immediately brought to bear on the employer by the striking workers, but on the extent to which other key actors in the society – the state, other capitalists, the media, political parties, the public, consumers – apply pressure because of systematic disruption. (Perrone, Wright, & Griffin, 1984.)

One method of assessing the 'economic interdependencies' of the oil sector is to think in terms of 'linkages', a concept coined by the developmental economist Albert Hirschman (2013) in 1958. In Hirschman's taxonomy, linkages between a resource like oil and the rest of the economy can take three forms: (fiscal) revenues, consumption and production. With regards to the first, Iran's oil rents formed a considerable portion of the GDP, fluctuating between 30 and 40 percent in the five years before the revolution, considerably higher than the 20 percent in 1971 due to the high oil price after 1973 (Figure 3). Hence the government's expenditures and investments in industrialization

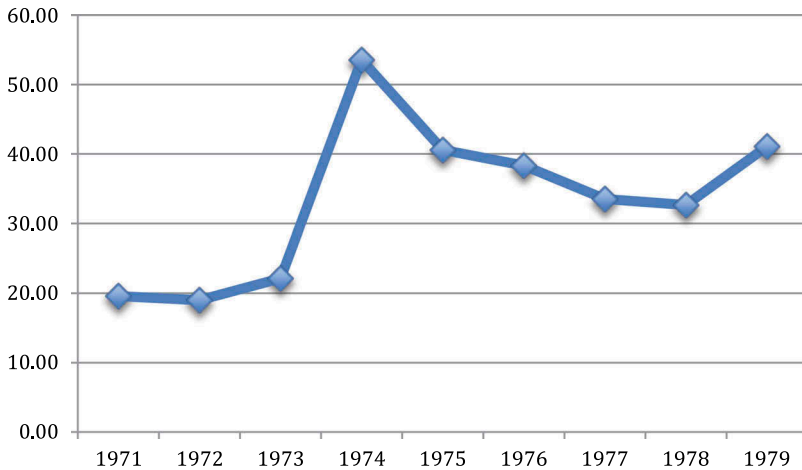


Figure 3. Oil rents as percentage of GDP, 1971–79. Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators* (online).

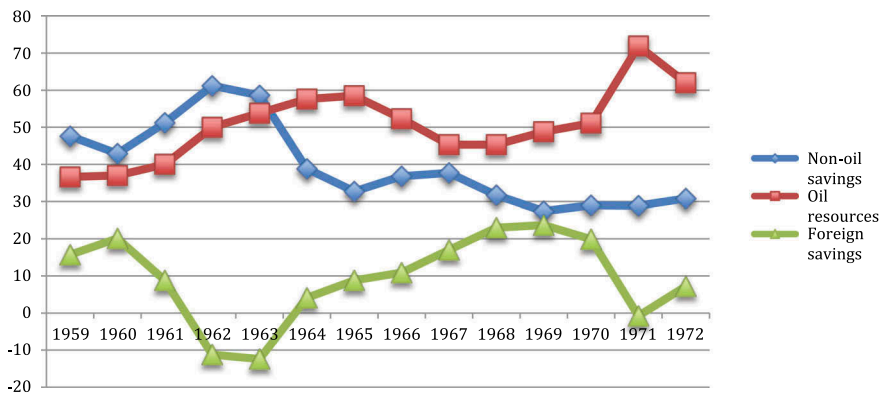


Figure 4. The sources of the financing of gross domestic capital formation, 1959–72. Source: Karshenas, *Oil, State, and Industrialization in Iran*, 213.

relied heavily on oil income (Karshenas, 1990, p. 280). As shown in Figure 4, oil revenue accounted for the biggest share in the formation of gross domestic capital formation.

Consumption linkage refers to the impact of aggregate incomes earned in the production of commodities when they generate demand for locally produced products. Given the oil industry's relatively small workforce, its consumption linkage was weak but not negligible given the relatively high income of oil workers. Hirschman's third category is the production linkage that connects commodity-producing industry to other industries through inputs (backward linkage) and outputs (forward linkage). Various studies have demonstrated the weakness of the backward and forward linkages of Iran's oil industry, positioning them near the bottom in comparison to other sectors (Sharifi, 2011; p. 47 and Emami, 1980; p. 54). The weak backward linkage of the oil industry can be explained by its dependence on imported intermediate and capital goods.

The forward linkages of the oil industry were also weak when measured by oil products serving as intermediate inputs for other industries. Indeed, this is its main difference to coal mining. As Mitchell (2011) writes, the material interconnection between 'industries of coal mining, railways, docking and shipping' enabled strikes to spread through them, creating 'a new political instrument: the general strike' (p. 23). In the case of Iran's oil industry in the 1970s, these linkages were weaker, but still present. Inside Iran, oil was transported not only through the pipelines but also through

trucks and trains. The harbors on Khark Island employed thousands of workers for the international export of oil. The oil industry also had a strong forward linkage with the petrochemical industry.

The oil industry, however, produces oil not mainly as raw material or an intermediary product for other industries, but as a source of energy. This form of forward linkage can be measured by the domestic consumption of oil, which also includes the consumption of households. As shows in [Figure 5](#), the consumption of oil increased rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus oil was an essential commodity on which the productive and reproductive activities of firms and households heavily depended—a relationship that gave oil workers considerable positional power.

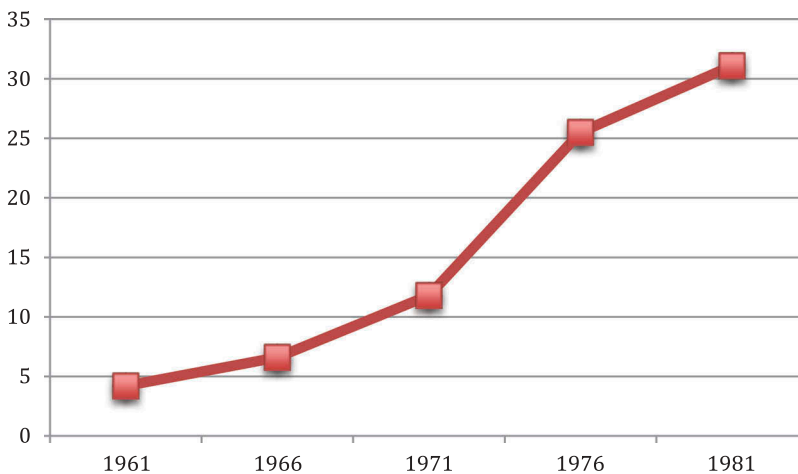
### **The labor market**

Oil workers' disruptive potential also depended on their location on the labor market—their bargaining power. After the Iranian state took control of the oil industry in 1973, it began to expand the workforce ([Figure 1](#)). Simultaneously, rapid industrialization and high economic growth rates created a shortage of skilled and semi-skilled workers and technicians on the labor market, increasing the bargaining power of oil workers (Elkan, 1977). This increased bargaining power was visible when a number of oil strikes in the 1970s won considerable concessions. Although dismissal from the oil industry was not a desirable outcome of industrial conflicts for oil workers, the shortage of skilled workers gave them the opportunity to move elsewhere for work.<sup>14</sup>

This situation also benefitted oil workers during the strikes. When the government brought retired workers and technical navy personnel to operate the oil industry, it failed, as the military technicians did not have the adequate skills and knowledge. In late December 1978, the oil workers of the southern region declared in their 15th News Bulletin that, 'the deployment of navy personnel to the exploitation units under the guise of technicians has led to serious injuries to the turbines and machines of these units' (quoted in *Navid*, 23 December 1978).

### **Internal organization of the oil industry**

Finally, a number of features of the internal organization of the oil industry enhanced oil workers' ability to mobilize collectively. Despite the scattered locations of the oil industry, workers were well-connected for a number of reasons. These included the internal phone lines, the training of new employees by experienced oil workers in Abadan, Aghajari and Ahwaz and the deployment of



**Figure 5.** Domestic oil consumption in million tons.  
Source: Statistical Center of Iran.

some of these experienced workers to newly built oil facilities, most importantly the Tehran refinery in the late 1960s and the Isfahan refinery in the 1970s. Moreover, oil workers from Abadan refinery were periodically sent to other refineries for the overhaul procedure.

Additionally, the collective bargaining procedures and the official 'yellow' trade unions of the blue-collar workers created channels of communication as workers' representatives met for a month every two years in Tehran to formulate common demands. Lastly, the recruitment policies of the oil industry privileged the children of oil workers, which meant that the class reproduction of oil workers had some considerable continuity, retaining forms of solidarity and memories of former collective actions, passed from generation to generation.

## Oil strikes and dual power

As I have tried to demonstrate so far, the oil strikes involved mass mobilizations that were enabled rather than hindered by the material aspects of the oil industry. Although the material linkages between oil workers and those in other sectors were weaker than in the case of the coalmines, as Mitchell correctly argues, merely focusing on them ignores the role of other linkages that enable the formation of new solidarities and collective action. The sudden growth of political consciousness and organization during the revolution feeding into the workplace, mobilizing pre-existing cultural and ideological connections among workers, is key to understanding the linkage between the oil strikes and the wider national struggles. As we will see below, the combination of material and socio-political linkages enabled oil strikes to connect to the revolutionary movement and shape its outcome. The oil strikes in fact played a crucial role in the emergence of a situation of dual power, as they animated the main organs of revolutionary authority: the Oil Strikes Coordinating Committee (OSCC), the secret Council of the Islamic Revolution, and the neighborhood committees (some of which later developed into the Committees of the Islamic Revolution).<sup>15</sup>

### *The Oil Strikes Coordinating Committee*

On 29 December 1978, Khomeini wrote a letter to Mehdi Bazargan, leader of the religious-liberal Freedom Movement of Iran (FMI), requesting him to lead the Oil Strikes Coordinating Committee (OSCC).<sup>16</sup> The other committee members were Hojjatoleslam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (a close ally of Khomeini), and the engineers Mostafa Katira'i, Kazem Hasibi (a veteran of the oil nationalization movement and a leading figure in the FMI) and Hashem Sabaghian (also a prominent member of the FMI). Two other engineers, Abolfazl Hakimi and Hossein Bani-Assadi, played an important role in organizing the committee's practical activities.

The OSCC's main task was the resumption of oil production for domestic use, as Khomeini feared the Shah would use the fuel shortage to legitimize the crack down on the revolutionary movement (Khomeini, 1978). The negotiation between Bazargan and the new director of NIOC, Abdollah Entezam, resulted in a number of important concessions, including the departure of the military from all oil fields and installations. Bazargan and Rafsanjani then travelled to the south to convince oil workers to return to work (*Ettela'at*, 6 January 1979). They were supported by Khomeini and more than 200 clerics who issued a statement (Parsa, 2000, p. 161). Following the negotiations with Bazargan during the first week of January, the Striking Employees of the Oil industry in the south issued their first communiqué, stating their 'willingness to implement the edict of Imam Khomeini', as it served 'the welfare of the defiant nation of Iran and the consolidation of his [Khomeini's] holy struggle for the overthrow of the illegal government'. In their statement, the oil workers announced a number of measures that gave them control of day-to-day matters in the oil industry, but they also accepted that contacts between different oil sites would run through the OSCC. This concession, of course, limited the oil workers' ability to collectively and independently coordinate activities, and make and implement decisions (*Ettela'at*, 7 January 1979). By late January, the committee oversaw almost the entirety of the oil industry's activities, including issuing permits for exports.

The establishment of the OSCC not only targeted the resumption of oil production, it served to marginalize the left in the oil strikes and bring them under the hegemony of the Islamist forces. As Hakimi explained:

The main issue confronting us was that we had to deal with different groups of oil workers... we tried to understand whether they were committed and Islamic or leftist... The labor troubles in Tehran were mostly in the pipelines and depots of Rey..., but the Tehran refinery was in our total control, especially [because] there was a very faithful and intelligent brother among the refinery workers, called [Assadollah] Aminian, who was enormously popular and influential... The committee of the Tehran refinery travelled for a number of times to Abadan, Tabriz and Shiraz and had various talks with them... through the workers of the Tehran refinery we could discipline them as well. (Mosahebeh ba agha-ye mohandes, n.d.)

### ***Council of the Islamic Revolution***

The establishment of the OSCC was not only a means to sideline the leftist and independent activists within the oil strikes, and by extension within the overall revolutionary movement; it was a crucial weapon in the confrontation with the monarchy. The oil strikes and the establishment of OSCC facilitated the creation of two other institutions central in this confrontation: the Council of the Islamic Revolution and the neighborhood committees. On 12 January 1979, two weeks after the OSCC began its activities, Khomeini ordered the establishment of the Council of the Islamic Revolution, whose members, including Bazargan, came from a group of 18 people that had been established in September 1978 (Bakhash, 1985, p. 51). Khomeini declared that the Council of the Islamic Revolution ‘included competent and committed Muslims’ who had to ‘study and explore the conditions for a transitional government and take the first preparations for its establishment, form a constitutive assembly and hold elections’ (*Ettela’at*, 13 January 1979).

It is hard to imagine the Council of the Islamic Revolution becoming authoritative if the OSCC had not taken over one of the state’s key functions—oil production. This was made quite explicit by Bazargan, when he advised Khomeini to call on the management of the oil company to cooperate with the OSCC so that Khomeini, ‘despite the Shah and his government would seize control over the state apparatus and order state employees’ (Matn-e mosahebe ba jenab-e aqaye mohandes Mehdi Bazargan [Transcript of Interview with Mehdi Bazargan], 1982).

### ***Neighborhood committees***

The organization of the oil strikes played a much more organic role in the emergence of the third institution of revolutionary power, the neighborhood committees that later transformed into the Committees of the Islamic Revolution. Given the shortage of kerosene, which was widely used for heating and cooking, the need to organize the distribution of fuel among the population was an urgent task that gave rise to the committees. While Tehran’s domestic consumption had been 9 to 10.5 million liters per day in the winter of 1977–78, the capital only received 5 to 5.5 million liters per day through late December 1978 and early January 1979.

In mid-January, the engineer Abolfazl Hakimi was sent to the distribution organization of NIOC to take care of fuel distribution and the ‘employees of the distribution organization of NIOC’ called on ‘clerics’ and ‘patriotic groups’ to help organize ‘fuel distribution committees’ (*Ayandegan*, 18 January 1979). This was another missed opportunity to establish—through the existing infrastructure of the oil industry—a national organization that could have linked the oil strikes and the working class communities. At the time of the revolution, the oil industry had 2358 fuel outlets in the cities and more than 10,000 in rural areas. These were strategic points, around which the distribution of fuel and other activities, particularly in Tehran could have been organized by the workers of NIOC’s distribution organization. In the absence of an independent national organization and strategy, the distribution organization played a subordinated role, however, taking its orders from the OSCC.

In early January 1979, Hakimi had asked local clerics to compile a list of 'active and trustworthy young people', who were subsequently gathered in a mosque and instructed. Within two weeks, almost all neighborhoods in Tehran had established their 'distribution committees', which distributed the available fuel through coupons or waiting lists (Mosahebeh ba agha-ye mohandes, n.d.). In some cases, fuel distribution committees emerged spontaneously or under the guidance of clerics. On January 4, for instance, a stunned SAVAK agent in Tehran telephoned the following report to his commander: 'A number of Khomeini supporters have taken initiatives to distribute fuel among needy people of the neighborhood. A number of these distribution [teams] have been observed and they claim that the distribution of fuel has been ordered by Khomeini' (Markaz-e barresi-ye asnad-e tarikhi-ye vezarat-e ettela'at, 2006a, p. 200). Similar reports poured in from other cities. In Isfahan, a SAVAK agent reported that ordinary people were protecting gas stations and distributing fuel (Markaz-e barresi-ye asnad-e tarikhi-ye vezarat-e ettela'at, 2006b, p. 146).

The Islamist groups did not approach the neighborhood committees for practical reasons only; they were seen as a counter-force to the leftist influence in the oil industry. Saeed Jalili, a school student at the time of the revolution and now a leading politician among Iran's Islamist hardliners, recalls that,

At the height of the revolution and also afterwards, the neighborhood committees played an important role in serving the people's needs... Revolutionaries gathered in mosques and created coupons... At that time, Marxism had many followers and, just as liberalism is defined by civil society, the slogan of Marxism was based on the *shoras* [councils]. This slogan was everywhere; there were students' *shoras*, workers' *shoras*, etc... In this situation, the neighborhood committee, with at its centre the mosque, was a 'slap in the face' [*tudahani*] and a harsh reply to them [the Marxists]. (Goftogu ba Saeed Jalili: mardom khedmatresan-e vaqe'ira be zur kandida mikardand [Interview with Saeed Jalili: people nominate those serving them by force], 2013)

The Committees of the Islamic Revolution that were established after February 1979, and formed one of the pillars of the Islamic Republic, drew their members from the pool of volunteers who coalesced around the fuel distributing neighborhood committees (Mosahebeh ba agha-ye mohandes, n.d.).

As political control over the production and distribution of oil was increasingly taken over by Khomeini and his allies, practical control over oil production remained in the hands of oil workers. Confronting Khomeini's and Bazargan's joint attempts to take control of the strikes, the oil strike leaders continued publishing statements, in an attempt to strengthen their position. They announced, 'Oil workers are a part of the Iranian working class and the greatest ally of progressive, anti-despotic, and anti-imperialistic strata', and added, 'Considering the decisive role of workers, especially workers in the oil industry, throughout the anti-despotic struggles, the future government is obligated to consider the interests of the working class' (*Kayhan*, 16 January 1979). Less than two weeks before the fall of the regime, a group of oil workers declared that a workers' representative should be included on the Council of the Islamic Revolution, whose membership Khomeini had yet to disclose. They stated:

Just as workers have played a crucial role in the current revolutionary situation, they should participate the day after the revolution when it is time for the genuine construction; this is only possible by workers' participation in the political affairs of the country. The first step would be taken by participation of a workers' representative in the revolutionary council. (*Kayhan*, 30 January 1979)

Without an independent national organization, however, oil workers lacked the political muscle to put weight behind their demands. As pro-Khomeini forces gradually took over the oil strikes, tensions with the left increased. In Ahwaz, a number of clerics intervened to restrict the independence of the strike committee and the role of secular oil workers' representatives, prompting the resignation of Mohammad Javad Khatami, the leading representative of the production units in Ahwaz. In an open letter (21 January 1979), he accused 'reactionary' clerics of making death threats against him and other representatives who didn't agree with their 'reactionary ideology'. He also criticized the OSCC for acting beyond its duties of 'inspection and supervision' of the oil strikes. This



included side-lining the strike committee, leaving local affairs to a number of 'not progressive' clerics, although according to previous agreements, the OSCC should have appointed a group to mediate between them and the strikers (*Ayandegan*, 1 February 1979).

The fact that the strike committees in the oil industry remained functioning despite increasing repression after February 1979 is testimony to the organization and class-consciousness that developed during the strikes. A few months after the fall of the Shah, the journalist and future Pulitzer Prize winner Kai Bird, who interviewed oil workers, wrote:

The oil industry is virtually controlled by dozens of independent worker komitehs which, though loyal to the central Government, are nevertheless participating in all the decisions related to the production and marketing of Iranian oil to the Western industrial world. Perhaps even more significant, the worker komitehs have unquestionably demonstrated that they can run the oil fields and refineries without their top-rank Iranian managers and without the expertise of some 800 foreign technicians... (Bird, 1980, p. 235)

This points to the great potential oil workers had to create an independent national organization. Immediately after the fall of the monarchy in February 1979, the strike committees in the oil industry developed into *shoras* (councils), giving workers a voice in the management of the industrial affairs. The post-revolutionary leaders, however, quickly moved to repress the *shoras* in the oil industry and officially banned them in early 1982.

## Conclusion

If oil's material hallmarks are an obstacle to mass social mobilizations that can effectively challenge authoritarian polities, as Mitchell argues in *Carbon Democracy*, then the Iranian oil strikes provide an example that calls for the revision of the universality of this claim. As I have argued above, the experience of the Iranian revolution calls for a more nuanced reading of the oil industry's potential for mobilization by looking at oil workers' disruptive potential, which depends on factors such as their size and concentration, positional power, location within the labor market, and the concrete organizational characteristics of the oil industry, including the presence of refineries, ancillary facilities and communication technologies.

Moreover, the Iranian oil strikes also demonstrate the limitation of Mitchell's claim that 'not consciousness, not a repertoire of demands, but an effective way of forcing the powerful to listen to those demands' (p. 21), provides the best explanation for successful mass mobilizations against authoritarian regimes. During the Iranian revolution, the oil workers had an 'effective way of forcing' the monarchy to retreat, and their strikes became a focal point around which wider social forces gathered and formed alternative organs of political power. Thus contrary to the dominant narrative of the Iranian revolution, which stresses the role of religion among the subaltern classes as the key factor enabling Ayatollah Khomeini's hegemony within the revolutionary movement, my account points to the role of political consciousness and organizational strategy, which were essential for the course the strikes took.

The fact that the political and organizational strategy was provided by the Islamist forces that took control of the oil strikes through the establishment of the OSCC and connected them on one hand to the community level struggles through the fuel distribution committees, and on the other to the national politics through the Council of the Islamic Revolution, can not be simply explained by the lack of material linkages between oil workers and the rest of the working class. To analyze these connections, one has to look at the spatial context of the oil strikes, which requires an analysis at the level of mobilization.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to Khomeini's bold initiative, the oil workers failed to create a strong *independent* organization that could coordinate local strikes and mobilize other workers around them, linking the local scale to regional and national scales.

Although this failure merits more scrutiny, the most important factors can be summed up here. Firstly, revolutionary developments unfolded very rapidly, leaving little time for oil workers to strategize

and respond to new situations. Secondly, the militant oil workers were not politically prepared for this situation. Despite its disintegration, the secular left had the *potential* of playing a much bigger role in the coordination of the oil strikes, given its historical ties to the oil workers (Tudeh party), the guerrilla movement resurrecting the left's popularity and prestige (Fada'ian), and the left leaning university graduates joining the ranks of white-collar workers—a potential that failed to be realized for mainly ideological reasons. Some experienced oil workers had a background in the Tudeh party or were sympathizers, but the party had lost almost its entire organization inside Iran and was paralyzed by the internal struggles between two competing political orientations, one calling for the overthrow of the monarchy and the other calling for moderate reforms (Behrooz, 1999, 79–81). When it adopted a more radical stance in 1978, it steered away from any action that could challenge the leadership of Khomeini within the revolutionary movement.

The younger generation of leftist oil workers, who often sympathized with the guerrilla organizations lacked the network, experience and the strategic outlook that could have assisted them in creating a stronger and more independent national organization. By focusing on armed struggle in the early 1970s, the left had developed neither the organizational, nor the conceptual resources to provide an effective leadership within the oil strikes. Even a glance at the leftist literature produced in the 1970s illustrates that there were few discussions about workplace struggles, including the theoretical and historical aspects of strikes. Hence valuable lessons from the oil workers' struggles of the 1940s were not transmitted to the new generation of activists.

Finally, generational and regional divisions among oil workers exacerbated political differences. In the Tehran refinery, for instance, an active group around the leftist trade unionist Yadollah Khosrowshahi, which consisted mainly of Abadanis, stood at a distance from the younger workers, who had been recruited from the small workshops of Tehran and had stronger religious dispositions.

Therefore, to fully understand both the successful mobilization of oil workers in 1978–79 and their failure to steer the strikes into a pro-democratic force, it is not sufficient to focus on the sheer material substance of oil, one also needs to include the subjectivity of oil workers. This approach to the relationship between oil and political change inevitably introduces an element of historical contingency. Far from speculative, this involves the recognition that if 'we accept that interactions [between social classes and political groups] are contingent, that how they turn out is not the only way they *could* have turned out, or that their effects might spill over the boundaries of people obviously interacting, we need a way to understand the real potential of interactions' (Krinsky, 2013, p. 120). More research is needed to understand the full dynamics and potential of the interactions between the oil workers and the Islamist leadership during the Iranian revolution, but what is important here is the contingency of the interaction, which, as I have argued, largely depended on pre-existing organizational and ideological factors among the oil workers, rather than the inevitable force of religious disposition.

Thus the history of the relationship between oil and politics, and its role in the Iranian revolution appears to be more fluid than initially expected. The Islamist forces around Khomeini might have failed to take full control of the oil strikes had they been confronted with a stronger national organization among the oil workers. The Iranian revolution was made by what its protagonists deemed possible, but also by the possibilities that weren't realized.

## Notes

1. Shah's conversation with his advisor and former Prime Minister Ali Amini, published on the *Tarikh-e Irani* website on 5 Dey 1394/26 December 2014. Retrieved from <http://tarikhirani.ir/fa/news/4/bodyView/4877> (accessed on 11 August 2015).
2. A very brief but good discussion of the oil strikes can be found in Parsa (1989), which also refers to the oil strikes' contribution to the creation of dual power, although in very general terms. Another account can be found in Turner, T. (1980. *Iranian oil workers in the (1978–79)*). Ashraf (2010) is the best account in Persian. Taeb (2003) has written the only monograph, in Persian, on the oil strikes, but has made scarce use of the available documents and uncritically reproduced the official narrative in which the role of Ayatollah Khomeini looms large while the role of other forces is ignored.

3. For an approach to democratization that does focus on working class agency but within a broader context of its interactions with the state and international power structures, see Rueschemeyer, Huber, & Stephens (1992).
4. My own critical reading of *Carbon Democracy* overlaps strongly with Labban's review article (2013). Where I have referred to Labban, it is to indicate that the criticism was directly borrowed from his review.
5. Author's interview with an oil worker who had been a Razamandegan member in the Abadan refinery before the revolution, 10 July 2013, Delft.
6. Re'isi, H. (24 April 1995). Interview by H. Ahmadi. Research Association for Iranian Oral History, Berlin.
7. Oil Company Security Office (n.d.). Mohammad Javad Tondguyan, NIOC employee. Document number 00383022. Islamic Revolution Document Center archives, Tehran.
8. SAVAK (26 September 1978). Report on workers' strikes. Document number 3562-۴. Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies archives, Tehran.
9. At the time the Shah's regime was blamed for the arson, but later evidence points to the complicity of Islamist activists.
10. On 23 December 1979, for instance, three gunmen from the Islamist guerrilla organization Movahedin ambushed and killed the American director of the Oil Services Company (OSCO) in Ahwaz. Malek Borujerdi, an Iranian oil official was assassinated on the same day by Mansurun, another Islamist guerrilla organization.
11. Prime Minister's Office (16 December 1978). Report about fuel shortage. Document number 16-299-7۶. Iranian Institute for Contemporary Historical Studies archives, Tehran.
12. Calculated from the figures in F. Nomani and S. Behdad (2006, p. 89).
13. On a yearly average, there were 692,000 coal miners in Great Britain in 1893-1902 in a working class that numbered 28.8 million in 1902, and in 1921 there were 1.2 million coal miners in a working class of 33.2 million people. The numbers of coal miners are from the Historical coal data of the Department of Energy and Climate Change (UK Government). Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/historical-coal-data-coal-production-availability-and-consumption-1853-to-2011> (accessed on 22 February 2016); the numbers of the working class are from Benson (1985, p. 4).
14. For the classic discussion of the relationship between unemployment and bargaining power, see Kalecki (1943).
15. For a more elaborate discussion of this topic, see Jafari (forthcoming) .
16. In its own communication, the committee called itself the *hey'at-e e'zami-ye Imam* (delegation sent by the Imam). Ayatollah Khomeini took a similar initiative to gain control over the strikes in the transport and the customs sector appointing a committee headed by Ezzatollah Sahabi.
17. Spatial context refers here to 'how key actors, organizations, and institutions relate to and affect other actors, organizations, and institutions across space'. See D. Martin and B. Miller (2003).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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